

The ABC's of Choosing a Postsecondary School

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Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education

Thinking about going back to school to improve yourself or your standard of living? Too old for high school? Consider joining the approximately 400,000 students who currently attend California's 3,000 private postsecondary schools. Private postsecondary schools offer everything from academic degrees to zoo assistant training.

These schools are regulated by the California Department of Consumer Affairs' [Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education \(Bureau\)](#). The Bureau approves the schools to operate and to offer educational programs. The Bureau's approval process is designed to ensure that these institutions meet certain academic standards and deliver the type of education promised in their promotional materials. The Bureau also administers the Student Tuition Recovery Fund, which reimburses tuition funds to students who do not get the education they contract for, such as when a school closes.

Do your homework: Before enrolling in a school, do your homework. You may be spending several years of your life and thousands of dollars on obtaining the education you seek. There are a variety of resources to help you determine your career goal. If you are planning to enter a licensed profession, the Department of Consumer Affairs regulates more than 200 and has informational materials on licensing requirements. Licensing materials can be ordered by calling (800) 952-5210 or printed from DCA's website at www.dca.ca.gov.

After you determine your career and/or academic goal, find several schools that offer programs in your field of interest. Before you visit the schools, call the Bureau at (916) 445-3427. Information on the school's legal status and the number and disposition of any resolved complaints filed can be provided. If the school claims to be accredited, contact the accrediting agency to verify the accreditation.

Here are some important factors to consider as you do your homework.

Take a field trip: Visit several schools. Do not enroll or sign anything until after you have been to all the schools you plan to visit. Obtain as much written information as you can, including catalogs from various schools. Monitor some of the classes and talk with students and instructors. Inquire about equipment they use, teacher qualifications, canceled classes, availability of special help, preparation for employment, placement services and counseling.

Do the math: Make sure you clearly understand the total cost of the program, including registration, supplies, equipment and tuition. Know exactly how and when you will have to pay these costs. Check on the grace period for withdrawal without financial commitment and the refund policy. Be aware that there are specific legal requirements regarding refund policies that schools must meet. The Bureau can provide you with this information.

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Talk to graduates: Have each school tell you its exact placement rate of graduates as well as the names of companies that hire those graduates. Ask to see their completion and placement logs so you can determine how many graduating students are placed in jobs, and the occupational titles of these jobs. The schools are legally required to keep this information and share it with you. Interview some of the graduates. Where are they now? Would they recommend the school?

Get extra credit: Every school has its own policy on what transfer credit, if any, it will accept. This is an especially important issue for degree-granting schools. If you want to know whether a school's credits will transfer to another institution, always check with the institution that will receive the credits. Only that institution can assure acceptance. Get it in writing—most school catalogs address this topic or you can request a letter.

Also, always check the transfer credit policy at the institution where you plan to take your highest level of education. If you are interested in obtaining an associate degree now, but may plan on earning a bachelor's degree later, checking with the institution where you pursue the bachelor degree will ensure you don't waste the time and money spent on your earlier education.

Prepare for your test: Find out whether the degree or course of study qualifies you for a professional licensure examination and what the school's pass rate of the examination has been. Check with the appropriate licensing board to verify. The California Department of Consumer Affairs can be contacted for licensing boards information at (800) 952-5210.

Read the material: Read the enrollment agreement and catalog carefully. These are the documents you will live by. Get everything you have been promised in writing.

Know your rights: Be aware that there are laws giving consumers the right to cancel specific contracts for any reason shortly after the consumer signs the contract. For home study or correspondence vocational courses, there is an eight-business day cancellation period. Cancellation and refund policies vary according to the type of school and the amount of time that has passed since the contract signing, so be sure to obtain a copy of the policy.

By doing your homework before you enroll in school, you'll help ensure you meet your goals.
Good luck!